***Joe Louis vs. Billy Conn: Boxing’s Unforgettable Summer of 1941* by Ed Gruver**

**Reviewed by Josh Sopiarz, Governors State University**

During the oft-quoted taxicab scene from Elia Kazan’s *On the Waterfront* (1954), Rod Steiger’s character, Charley, asks his brother Terry, played by Marlon Brando, how much he weighs. Charley then says, “when you weighed one hundred and sixty-eight pounds you were beautiful. You coulda been another Billy Conn.” Those words, and Brando’s, “I coulda been a contender” retort, were written by Budd Schulberg whose screenplay for the film won an Oscar in 1955. Well known for his exhaustive knowledge of boxing minutiae, Schulberg had witnessed just about everything boxing could offer by the time, in 2002, reporters from *The Guardian* asked him to identify the greatest fight he had ever seen. After a brief pause, Schulberg answered: the “tremendously dramatic” action of the first Joe Louis-Billy Conn match.

That fight and its participants are the subjects of Ed Gruver’s most recent book. *Joe Louis vs. Billy Conn* is a zippy read with its massive narrative context (e.g. the incredibly rich sporting milieu of 1941, the biographies of Louis and Conn, boxing history in general, race relations of the era, and the rise of Fascism in Europe), carefully distilled so that readers both familiar and unfamiliar with the particulars will find Gruver’s exposition interesting and helpful and not at all overbearing. The first half of the book is biographical and opens with two chapters dedicated to Louis and Conn. A nice touch is that Conn’s biographical chapter is supplemented by a brief foreword written by his son, Tim. Chapter three introduces readers to the two fighters’ managers—Charles “Chappie” Blackburn (Louis) and Johnny Ray (Conn). Chapter four recaps the fights Louis and Conn had with others in the runup to their own championship bout. And, lastly, chapter five tells the story of New York’s Polo Grounds and the man, Don Dunphy, who provided the radio call for Louis vs. Conn. The five remaining chapters are about the fight itself. An epilogue covers the aftermath.

Gruver captures and illustrates the sights and sounds—and nervous energies—surrounding the fight admirably. This is the difficult task. Video of the fight exists and can be accessed with relative ease, though viewing it might prove to be something of a let down by today’s standards. There are limited cameras—black and white, obviously—catching the action, so following exchanges between the boxers can be difficult. And, since the fight was not broadcast on television, the uploaded videos come with narration added in after the fact; some narrations were added by random boxing enthusiasts. Dunphy’s radio call was recorded and has been preserved, though finding it is significantly more difficult. Luckily, Gruver interlaces quotes from Dunphy’s call into his explication of the in-ring drama with probably—although aptly—embellished mentions of crooked grins, creased faces, crashing lighting, and the like.

Gruver’s details throughout create a full picture of the ballyhoo surrounding not just Louis vs. Conn but the state of the nation’s sports and politics on the eve of its entry into World War II. One of these masterful instances appears in the book’s fourth chapter “Prelude to a Classic Confrontation.” Gruver, in making a larger point about race in boxing during the first half of the twentieth century, uses Joe Louis’s number of title defenses when compared to white champions who were believed to have less to prove and thus fought less often. Remarkably, even for 1940s standards, Billy Conn was Joe Louis’s seventh opponent and title defense in seven months before the two met in June 1941. Contrast that with Jim Braddock, Max Baer, and Jack Sharkey who all defended their titles just once during two-year reigns. Or Jack Dempsey who fought the same number of title defenses as Louis, but over a seven-year, and not seven-month, period. There are times when Gruver strays from Louis vs. Conn to work in anecdotes or short descriptions of other fights that are interesting, but not necessarily pertinent (e.g. a rather lengthy digression to the 1919 Dempsey vs. Willard fight in the fourth chapter). Ultimately, though, Gruver’s book marks not just a unique fight, but also a unique moment in American history when the country approached the precipice of world war. Louis and Conn would meet again for a rematch after the War and, although the outcome of the second fight was the same, though less dramatic, as the first, the intervening years radically changed the men and their world. Gruver captures this shift and presents it in ways sure to interest boxing fans and researchers alike.

Gruver, Ed. *Joe Louis vs. Billy Conn: Boxing’s Unforgettable Summer of 1941*. Lyons Press,

2022. Hardcover, $27.95.